Huddersfield Local History Society

Huddersfield Local History Society
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Newsletter No. 6
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Huddersfield

LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLetter

No. 6 1987

SMALLPOX IN THE HOLME VALLEY 1892 – 3

By Dr. J.B. Eagles

Many years ago a friend lent me a booklet produced in 1938 to commemorate the centenary of New Mill National School; although no longer used as a school, this building still stands opposite the parish church. Twenty pages of this little book comprise extracts from the "log", the daily school record, kept by various headmasters from 1862 to 1938. An entry dated August 4th, 1893 reads as follows:

"A circular sent to the parents, explaining that a hospital was now provided for Small-Pox patients, and that, if there were no fresh cases, the school would reopen on the 14th. inst." (1)

This was the first I had heard of a small-pox epidemic in New Mill although I had heard some talk of an old Small-pox Hospital on the outskirts of the village. Indeed when I moved in 1960 to the house where I still live at the bottom of Butterley Lane in New Mill, an elderly neighbour told me that the stable block there had been built, sometime in the early 1900s, with stone acquired from the demolition of a "hospital" at a place called Grassy Cliff, not far away on the slopes of Mount Scar.

Subsequent research revealed that there was indeed an epidemic of smallpox in New Mill in 1893, preceded by a smaller outbreak in Holmfirth the year before, and that very slight traces of the old hospital can still be seen if you know where to look.

The Background

Smallpox has now been eliminated from the world. Although the virus itself may have helped somewhat by declining in virulence, there is little doubt that the main factor in its conquest was the judicious, world-wide use of vaccination. In the last quarter of the 18th century Jenner observed that sufferers from cowpox, a trivial infection caught from cattle, acquired some immunity to smallpox. From this he developed the technique of vaccination, artificially inoculating human beings with cowpox. His work was published in 1798, and immediately recognised as a great advance; parliament voted him £5000 in 1802, and a further £20,000 five years later. The new preventive measure was rapidly taken up by the well-informed and well-to-do, but the great mass of ordinary folk were slow to avail themselves of the protection offered.

A succession of vaccination acts were passed from 1840 to 1871, making vaccination first available to all, then compulsory in infants and finally imposing heavy penalties for non-compliance. But still throughout the 19th century, and indeed well into the present century, epidemics of smallpox continued to occur. Many people still refused to take advantage of the protection offered. Moreover as the century advanced persuasion, propaganda and compulsion from medical men, sanitary reformers and government was met by a rising tide of opposition from anti-vaccinationists; so much so that in 1898 the government felt obliged to pass an amending act, allowing exemption from vaccination on grounds of conscience.

Much of the opposition to vaccination was ignorant and erroneous. It was suggested that those vaccinated would acquire bestial characteristics from the cattle who were the source of the vaccine. Miss Marjorie Wilkinson whose grandfather, a staunch and bigoted Golcar Baptist, was a doughty warrior in the cause of anti-vaccination, has supplied me with a poem which sets out the possible horrible consequences of vaccination:

"O Jenner, Thy book nightly phantasies rousing
Full oft makes me quake for my heart's dearest treasure,
For fancy, in dreams, oft presents them all browsing
On common, just like Nebuchadnezzar.
There, nibbling at thistle, stand John, Jem and Mary,
On their forehead, O Horrible, crumpled horns bud.
There Tom with his tail, and William all hairy,
Reclined in a corner, are chewing the cud."

Apart from these bizarre objections the anti-vaccinationists could advance some more cogent arguments; sometimes vaccinated persons did get smallpox, vaccination in infancy did not confer lifelong immunity. Occasionally there were serious, even fatal reactions, and septic infection could arise from careless technique. Public vaccination was in the hands of the poor law

doctors, often feared by the populace, who were afraid they would be contaminated by other diseases transmitted from dirty paupers.

Probably the most potent sentiment fuelling the fire of anti-vaccinationism was the resentment felt in the country at large because of all the public-health legislation, seen as interference with individual freedom, which had accumulated rapidly in the 19th century. One objector complained: 'we are an over-legislated-for people', and a lady-poet, Mrs. Hume Rothery exclaimed:

"Under favour of the odious vaccination acts, a poor man's house may be entered by the emissaries of the Medical Star Chamber to ascertain whether his children have been blood-poisoned according to law."

indeed by 1893 local medical officers of health had acquired Draconian powers. In his report for that year Dr. Kaye, the Huddersfield M.O.H., listed the actions which he could and did take in cases of smallpox:

"Instant removal of all cases.
Disinfection of the premises with sulphur fumes.
Disinfection of all materials therein and removal of all clothing and bed-linen to the steam disinfector.
Bathing and disinfection of all other inmates at the Hospital.
Constant supervision of the other members of the family; their mixing with others forbidden, and as far as possible prevented."

It is not surprising that some people regarded the vaccination acts as the last straw in a burden of meddlesome legislation. Resistance could sometimes go to great lengths. At Keighley in 1875 there was a serious outbreak of smallpox with 208 cases and 25 deaths (3). The local Board of Guardians were instructed to organise a programme of vaccination. They refused to do this and subsequently ignored a high court order. As a result they were committed to York Gaol. But they had a lot of support in Keighley where the people expressed their feelings in the following jingle:

"It is for you the noble guardians
In York Gaol lay today;
To rescue, men of Keighley
And unite without delay."

On the other side proponents of vaccination continued to urge their views with vigour. In his 1893 report the M.O.H. for Huddersfield produced gruesome photographs of fatal smallpox cases and wrote:

"If any convicible anti-vaccinationist could have witnessed the horrible condition of both patients. . . . . features swollen beyond recognition and covered from head to foot with loathsome-smelling scabs, and totally incapable of doing anything for themselves, I do think he would seriously have reconsidered his position."

It was against this background of entrenched controversy that smallpox came to the Holme Valley in 1892-3, first in Holmfirth then in New Mill. Public reaction was vigorous, even violent. This can only be understood when considered against the pre-existing emotional background.

The Outbreak in Holmfirth

Prior to 1892 for almost 20 years there had been no cases of smallpox in the Holme Valley, and for a few years the incidence had been small in the country as a whole. There were no cases at all in Huddersfield in 1888, 1889 and 1890, and only a very few in 1891. But 1892 showed an alarming upsurge throughout the country, and especially in the north. In England and Wales in 1890 there were only 15 deaths from smallpox, 48 in 1891, but in 1892 there were 426 deaths; 46 smallpox deaths occurred in the West Riding alone in the second quarter of 1892.

Everyone must have been aware that smallpox was inexorably increasing; the authorities were on the lookout. In May the Holmfirth M.O.H. reported that he had been carefully screening the 'caravan people' who had come into the town for Holmfirth Feast. In 1892 local government in the Holme Valley was in the hands of seven separate Local Boards, who sometimes joined forces but more often acted independently. These Boards had been set up as recently as 1888

along with the new County Councils. As yet their duties and functions were somewhat ill-defined, not yet consolidated by custom. Moreover they were continually subject to reminders and instructions from the County Council which, with their meagre resources, they were unable or unwilling to put into effect.

The Medical Officer for all the Holme Valley Boards was a man called Berry, who had qualified as an apothecary in 1858, and practised from Huddersfield Road, Holmfirth. He probably had a fairly lowly status in the local medical community; almost certainly he was a poor law doctor. Despite this he undoubtedly conducted his public health duties with energy and success.
In June 1892 a man called George Whitely came to Holmfirth with his wife and children from Rastrick. His wife was a daughter of Abel Haigh of Cartworth Fold, Holmfirth, and the Whitely family came to stay there. The houses at Cartworth Fold are still extant. They are less than a mile from the centre of Holmfirth, but the setting is rural and isolated. In 1892 there were more houses thereabouts, but the place was still fairly remote. The family had hardly arrived when the baby developed smallpox. All the children were unvaccinated. Dr. Berry acted promptly. He recommended, and the Board approved, that an adjoining house in Cartworth should be rented, so that cases and contacts could be separated; there were 12 persons living in Abel Haigh's house in very cramped conditions. The family were strictly quarantined; food, water and medicines were dumped outside the cottages, and the inmates earned the money to pay for these by disinfecting and whitewashing the property. These measures were very successful in containing the outbreak. Four other members of the family became infected but only one other person outside the family; this was a man called George Beever, who had been employed to deliver supplies to the beleaguered household. All the patients recovered; there were no deaths. The whole operation cost the Local Board over £60, and this gave rise to some resentment in the local press.

The Holmfirth Hospital Project

The Board and its medical officer had every reason to be pleased with themselves; a potentially dangerous outbreak had been most successfully limited. One might have expected the whole incident to pass from the public mind in an atmosphere of relief and satisfaction. Far from it; almost at once the Board became engaged in violent controversy.

Earlier in 1892, before ever the outbreak at Cartworth Fold had arisen, the County Council had begun to pressurise the Local Board, urging them to make provision for the isolation of cases of infectious disease, especially smallpox. In March and April negotiations had taken place with the other, adjacent local boards, and some measure of agreement had been reached to acquire and operate jointly a suitable property as an isolation hospital. There were already some similar schemes in existence. Huddersfield had had a hospital at Birkby for a long time, and a new hospital at Mill Hill was at the planning stage. Linthwaite had taken the initiative in making similar provision for the Colne Valley; they had a hospital at Meltham, but were most reluctant to accept cases from authorities outside the Colne Valley. Indeed when Dr. Matthews sent a case of smallpox to Meltham from Underbank, there was an almighty row as to who should defray the cost.

When the Cartworth outbreak occurred, the Holme Valley Boards were on the point of a decision. The initiative came from Holmfirth, although even there opinion was divided. Of the other authorities, Fulstone was enthusiastic, Hepworth and Austonley were willing to join and Netherthong pleaded poverty; Holme replied that they had their own arrangements, and were quite satisfied with them.

On August 8th Mr. Marshall presented the Holmfirth Board with a definite scheme. He proposed that, acting in concert with the other authorities, they should buy a farmhouse and 13½ acres of land at Upper Snape on the Meltham border, for the purpose of a joint infectious hospital. The purchase price was £650. This proposal was carried by 6 votes to 3. Upper Snape is on the tops above Holmfirth in the direction of Greenfield, close to where the sheepdog trials are held nowadays. It is a wild and windy spot, and in the ensuing controversy a remark of Dr. Trotter, the contemporary member of a famous local medical family was much quoted:
"If they take ill people up that wild, cold place, they will need all 13½ acres as a graveyard."

The vote of August 8th sparked off vigorous local controversy which continued throughout August, until in early September the decision was reversed. Mr. Marshall, the pioneer of the scheme, was a local magnate who lived at Wellhouse, Thongsbridge. He was a "comer-in" and his

opponents did not fail to draw public attention to this. Opposition on the Board was led by Mr. Brook of Wooldale; when he lost the vote on August 8th he turned to the community at large, and began to whip up opposition. He wrote to the local paper: "Is it at all necessary for rural sanitary authorities . . . . . sparsely populated with plenty of room to breathe and turn themselves in, to carry into effect all the measures which may be necessary in towns and boroughs, which are thickly populated."Mr. Brook also mobilised the Wooldale Ratepayers Association who wrote to the Board: "This association enters a vigorous protest against the hospital policy of the Holmfirth Local Board, believing it to be altogether unnecessary and contrary to the wishes of the large majority of the ratepayers." It does seem that trade was bad in Holmfirth at the time;there are frequent references to unemployment and empty mills. New manufacturers could only be attracted to the Holme Valley if rates were kept down. Moreover the Local Board already had expensive commitments such as a projected technical school, and the County Council were always pressing on them costly sewerage and drainage schemes. Outside the Local Board the most militant of the opponents of the hospital plan was Mr. John Holmes of Kirkroyds. He was a rope manufacturer and quite a young man at the time. He was later to be nicknamed "monkey John", and to become famous as an irascible eccentric. It is said that in the general strike of 1926 he drove his own lorry with a loaded revolver on the dashboard.

On the 3rd of September there was a public meeting in Holmfirth, chaired by Mr. Quarmby, Deputy Constable of the Graveship of Holme. Prior to the gathering, Wooldale Band paraded the streets, whipping up supporters. There was an overwhelming vote against the hospital project, but it appeared that the Local Board were not disposed to take any notice of this. Indeed Mr. Marshall was heard to remark, "He would not be guided by asses whipped together by a brass band."

The opposition moved quickly. The Board were due to meet again on September 5th, at which meeting Mr. Brook had given notice he would move to rescind the previous decision. On the evening of the 5th a large crowd assembled at the top of Victoria Street in response to an advertisement which had appeared in the Holmfirth Express: "RATEPAYERS In spite of your unanimous protest, the District Hospital Committee have decided to proceed with the Harden Hill Site. Assemble in thousands to utter an emphatic protest on Monday evening at the top of Victoria St., and send a deputation to the Holmfirth Local Board which will then be sitting."

Mr. John Holmes harangued the crowd and was duly elected a member of the deputation. Once inside the Board meeting he made a personal attack on Mr. Marshall, referring to him as a comer-in and adding: "A gentleman of the Board had suggested they needed an Asylum. Well, doubtless they did, and he could suggest a candidate for admission." Mr. Marshall was clearly nettled and, in the course of a long speech, gave as good as he got: "It had been urged in the course of the opposition that he "Mr. Marshall' was an importation into the district. Under the whole of the circumstances he was quite prepared to be counted as such. If the gentleman who sat in the corner (Mr. Holmes) was a specimen of the native-born talent, he desired to be set down as an importation."

However this time Mr. Marshall did not have his way. In the face of the vociferous public outcry, Mr. Brook's motion to rescind the previous minute and proceed no further with the hospital, was carried by 6 votes to 5. Despite their decision the unhappy Board members were roughly handled when they emerged from the meeting. There was a scuffle in which Mr. Marshall fell to the ground, and the legislators were pursued to the nearby White Hart by a hostile, jeering crowd.

So ended the Holmfirth hospital project. In October came a further letter from the County Council asking what provision the Holmfirth Board proposed to make for smallpox cases. The clerk was instructed to tell the whole sorry tale, recount the success of the Cartworth outbreak, and say that similar steps would be taken in future.

The Outbreak in New Mill

Meanwhile in the country as a whole smallpox continued to advance. In 1893 the Lancet reported more cases and the involvement of fresh areas; the situation was worst in the north of England. In the Holme Valley sporadic cases continued to occur. In January there was a case at the Deanhouse workhouse, and another at Fulstone Hall, New Mill. The following month the

infant daughter of the Hepworth schoolmaster went down with the disease, and there were two further cases at Fulstone Hall. There was also one at Honley.

The spring was unusually dry; no rain fell at all for 29 consecutive days in March and April. These were ominous conditions for the spread of an infection. At the end of May the disease struck right at the heart of New Mill. Mrs. Barraclough was the first case. She lived just behind the National School, in a group of houses still known as Barraclough Row. All around was a warren of thickly populated little yards, some of which still survive. This was a much more favourable habitat for smallpox than the relatively secluded Cartworth Fold.

By the beginning of July there were 5 fresh cases, and Mrs. Barraclough had died. New Mill was the concern of the Fulstone Local Board and they were caught at a disadvantage; they had no Sanitary Inspector. But they proceeded to appoint one at once, a Mr. Wadsworth,and Dr. Berry was very active. Two nurses were imported from Bradford to look after the sick.One of them, Isobel Waterhouse, subsequently married Mr.Wadsworth and settled in the Holme Valley. The school was closed, contacts were vaccinated, and the affected area was cordoned off. One of the cases was a Mrs. Rowley; her son, Willie, lived until 1983, and was a boy of three and a half in 1893. He recalled living behind the cordon, and how passers-by used to throw sweets to him. But the disease continued to spread. Miss Marjorie Booth, whose father John was then an infant and caught the disease, recalls a family tradition that he was infected by a pet cat which had lain on one of the sick-beds.

By mid-July there were twelve cases and the village was in the grip of panic. Some people fled from the place. The late Mrs. M.E. Brook told me that in 1893 she was living at the Albert Hotel, Thongsbridge; relatives from New Mill took refuge there for the duration of the outbreak. The local baker sought to escape to Holmfirth, but was already incubating the disease, much to the wry amusement of his neighbours. In this climate of fear a deputation, representing 95 householders, presented a petition to the Fulstone Local Board: "We the undersigned ratepayers beg to offer our advice regarding the cases of smallpox at New Mill; after due consideration we have come to the conclusion that a place should be provided for any fresh outbreak that may occur. We think it better to have the patients taken away and have the houses thoroughly disinfected, rather than having the whole family in quarantine as they are at present. Hoping you will give this your consideration."

Mr. C.S. Tinker of Meal Hill, local coal owner and Chairman of the Board responded: "Something should be done, and something would have been done, but for the disorderly meetings at Holmfirth."

Something was done. During the next 10 days the Board acquired the lease of a property called Grassy Cliff, on the slope of Mount Scar, about three-quarters of a mile south east of the village. In a very short time they equipped the place, improved the access to it and installed Miss Waterhouse as matron. On the 12th of August four patients were admitted, Mrs. Rowley and Mr. Barraclough, both already convalescent, and two more recent cases, John Booth and Peter Kaye. Only one further case arose, an infant, and this too was admitted to the new hospital. And there the epidemic came to an end. In all there were 20 cases and two deaths, Mrs. Barraclough and Mrs. Mellor. The hospital inmates must have had a pleasant time. It was still late summer and they had a beautiful place in which to convalesce, green and sunny, perched high above New Mill with a splendid view. Willie Rowley recalled being taken to see his mother at Grassy Cliff; he stood on Scaley Gate and waved to her as she was stationed at the other end of the hospital drive. Later on there was a happy occasion when Miss Waterhouse left Grassy Cliff as a bride, to be married to her sanitary inspector.

The Subsequent History of the Hospital

The hospital at Grassy Cliff was conceived, planned and brought into being in less than a month. This time there was no public outcry; indeed the scheme seems to have been generally approved. But it did not meet with the approval of the redoubtable John Holmes. He was nettled by the remarks made by the Fulstone Board chairman about "disorderly meetings at Holmfirth." He wrote to the local paper attacking Mr. Tinker most intemperately: "I am told thay they never use the franchise at Fulstone, and that Mr. Tinker and his servants gain seats on the Board simply by nominating one another . . . . . Mr. Tinker sneers at a meeting attended by 7 or 800 rate-

payers and tells them they are 150 years behind the times. If so, what about Mr. Tinker and his FOOLSTONE Local Board, which has had no election for four years and has forgotten how to use the franchise. The Board's deliberations are mere family matters. If we, with our annual elections are 150 years behind, we must relegate Mr. Tinker to Cedric the Saxon's time."

There was much more in the same vein, and he then went on to criticise the Board's handling of the recent epidemic. He argued that too little had been done and too late, and that this ". . . . . was the immediate cause of the further spread of the smallpox, and what was worse, a deadly paralysing panic, fed and fired by the aimless bungling of the Board."

But this time John Holmes did not speak for the people. Further correspondents supported the Board and attacked Mr. Holmes. One such, signing himself 'ANTI-CANT', urged Mr. Tinker to ignore the attack (which he did) and concluded: "Let us hope that the experience of the last few months will induce our local authorities in the future to act as reasonable and responsible men, and not as if intimidated by a few windy, wordy wobblers such as Mr. John Holmes." Controversy in the press was certainly pursued with vigour in Victorian times. In the event Mr. Holmes and his fellow agitators were probably right. After the epidemic of 1893, the hospital at Grassy Cliff never received any further patients and became an increasing embarrassment to the local authority. It was necessary to maintain the buildings and equipment and employ a caretaker.

In 1894 the Fulstone Local Board came to an end, and was succeeded by New Mill Urban District Council. In 1897 the Council found considerable evidence of dilapidation, and expensive repairs were necessary. In June of the following year they received a letter from the solicitors of the owner (the Council were tenants with a repairing lease). He wanted the Council to buy Grassy Cliff, and if they were not willing to do so, he gave notice that he would sell it by auction. The council could not afford to buy, and were already negotiating with neighbouring authorities to join in another hospital project.

The auction of Grassy Cliff duly took place at New Mill on July 6th 1898, and there was a surprise outcome. Mr. William Hirst of Oak Leas New Mill, who was a sort of unofficial squire to the village, bought the place for £140 , and then, in the words of the Clerk to the Council: "He declared his intention of handing over the property as a gift to the Council, conditionally on its being kept as a smallpox hospital, and that he was not put to any cost in respect of the conveyance, etc." It was understood that if the place ceased to be a hospital the ownership would revert to Mr. Hirst. The lawyers took more than a year to enshrine this rather complex arrangement in legal form.

By that time New Mill Council were anxious to be rid of the place; even its maintenance was proving too much for their resources. In October 1899 it was proposed that the hospital be abandoned and there was a tied vote, 6 for and 6 against; the chairman refused to use his casting vote. By now the Council were already taking part in the Colne and Holme Joint Hospital Committee, and had access to Moor Top Hospital, Meltham. In August 1901 the caretaker was discharged, and the equipment transferred to Meltham. Finally, early in 1902, the place was abandoned, and ownership reverted to Mr.Hirst. Very shortly after that he had the buildings demolished.

The site of the hospital can still be identified, although very few stones remain. It stood just below Hirst Lane, New Mill, not far from Upper Holmhouse Farm, slightly to the south of a path joining Upper and Lower Holmhouse. The drive which led to the vanished building can still be identified, though this will not be possible for much longer; this drive commenced on Scaleygate, about 100 yards below its junction with Hirst Lane. The only prominent survival of the hospital is a grassy promontory at the end of the drive, retained by substantial walls. I have little doubt that this was the site of the 'cab-stand', referred to several time in both Local Board and Council minutes. Presumably this was where the horse-drawn vehicle which served the hospital was turned and parked. This promontory makes a splendid viewpoint; standing there one looks down on the village which, in 1893, was stricken with disease and in the grip of panic.

Sources

Holmfirth Express 1892 and 1893
Holmfirth Local Board Minutes 1891–93
Fulstone Local Board Minutes 1893–97
New Mill Urban District Council Minutes 1894–1902
Huddersfield Borough M.O.H. Annual Reports 1888–1894
Personal Communications from: the late Mrs. Mary Barber (grand-daughter of Isobel Waterhouse); the late Mrs. M.E. Brook; the late Mr. Herbert Mosley; the late Mr. Willie Rowley; Miss Marjorie Booth; Miss Marjori Wilkinson; Mr. and Mrs. Colin Hudson (relatives of John Holmes).John Holmes)- of

References

(1) New Mill National School Centenary Brochure (1938), p.15
(2) F.B. Smith, "The People's Health, 1830–1910", London 1979, p.166
(3) Op. Cit. p. 168

HUDDERSFIELD LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWS

MAY 1987

1. Members are reminded that the Junior Library is open to the public until 7.30 p.m. and only after that time is it to be regarded as a meeting room and projectors set up, chairs set out and lights tested.

2. The attention of members is drawn to a course which may be held in the Huddersfield Library on Wednesday mornings starting in September 1987. This will be a GCSE History (Local History) course and the tutor will be Mrs. H. Haigh. The course emphasises practical skills and the use of source material in the Kirklees Archives and Local Studies Departments will be a crucial part of the course. Further details from Mr. E.M. Abbott, Huddersfield Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, St. James's Road, Marsh.

3. The Society is in the process of establishing a Family History Group. Those interested should contact the group organiser: David Jepson, 39 St. James's Road, Marsh.

4. The Hon. Secretary is always glad to hear of speakers on local history. We try to invite professional and amateur speakers to discuss their research.

5. Members are encouraged to write items for the Newsletter or to send in copies of a document or photograph with an explanation or even a query. Dr. D. Jones will be glad to receive all items at the Polytechnic Library, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH.

6. Confederation of West Riding Local History Societies: 23 May 1987 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m.

Saddleworth

Seminar on the Domestic Woollen Industry
Leader - Julian Hunt

Agricultural Enclosure
Leader - Alan Petford

Lunch

Guided Walks in Saddleworth

Cost £5.00 - Applications for places to Mr. D.J. Hallam, 15 Wilthorpe Road, Barnsley. Telephone: 0226 203880.

Pontefract

Sunday 9th August

Guided tour of Historic Pontefract
Commencing 2.30 p.m., finishing 4.30 p.m.

More details nearer the time.

5th May, 1987